

## IS EGYPT PLANNING A SECOND ROUND?

### *A Key Sector of the Arab-Israel Cold War*

BRIAN FAULKNER

**F**IFTEEN months have now gone by since Egypt—the first of the Arab League countries to negotiate with the new Jewish state—signed an armistice with Israel at Rhodes. The agreement defined a temporary frontier between the two states, and established a no-man's-land between their armies. More important, it broke the semblance of Arab unity which had marked the invasion of Palestine on May 15, 1948. It appeared reasonable to hope that, given time and opportunity, Egypt would continue to move gradually towards normal relations with her new neighbor. Instead, however, Egypt is in the forefront of the fresh diplomatic offensive which the Arab states are waging against Israel, and, at this writing, her fighting forces are being rearmed on a hitherto unprecedented scale.

Does this portend a fresh attack on Israel by Egypt which would, willy-nilly, involve the other Arab states? Or is Egypt merely going through the motions of rearming to satisfy her wounded pride and to regain lost prestige and influence in the Arab world?

**A**T THIS juncture, and in spite of the present Egyptian attitude towards Israel, the fac-

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EGYPT is rearming rapidly. The government in Cairo has earmarked one hundred and forty million dollars—one third of its total budgetary expenditure—for the Egyptian fighting forces this year. Does this portend war against Israel again, or is Egypt merely seeking to satisfy her pride as the leading Arab nation, a pride which was deeply wounded by the 1948 defeats in Palestine? In this article BRIAN FAULKNER discusses the psychological factors that affect the issue in Cairo, and also outlines Egypt's grave social and political problems. Brian Faulkner is the pen name of a British writer who has a long association with the Middle East, its peoples, and its leaders. This is his first article for COMMENTARY.

tors which make for a peaceful settlement would seem to outweigh by far, on a short-term basis, those which point to a new outbreak of fighting. These peace factors may be listed briefly as follows:

1. Anglo-American policy requires stability in an area that has important naval, military, and air bases on Russia's Southern flank.\* British and American diplomacy in Cairo is directed, therefore, to slowly reducing Egyptian hostility towards Israel and to ensuring that, in any event, it must not be allowed to become anything other than a "paper war."

2. Since the Arab defeats in Palestine, Egypt sets no great store by the Arab League. Her statesmen still pay lip service to it, but they regard themselves as having been deserted by their Arab allies in the recent war.

3. Egypt made no important territorial gains in Palestine, and, therefore, is not subject to the charge by the other Arab states that in negotiating with Israel, it seeks peace for purely selfish reasons—as would, for instance, be the case with Jordan.

4. In Cairo itself, the balance of political power has passed recently from the hands of King Farouk and the palace clique—who were primarily responsible for Egypt's intervention in Palestine—to the Wafd,† which was in opposition at the time of the war, is opposed to many of the policies stemming

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\*Apparently to safeguard British interests in the Suez Canal Zone, the Duke of Gloucester on instructions from England's King George recently conferred upon King Farouk the rank of major general in the British Army. The *New York Times* report from Cairo suggested that "King Farouk's acceptance of the honorary appointment is strong evidence that Egypt is seeking a constructive solution . . . that would end infringement of her sovereignty but would not result in an anti-British attitude. . . ."

†Wafd means "delegation" in Arabic. The party takes its name from the first Egyptian delegation which visited Britain in 1919 to seek independence.



from the palace, and is, moreover, mainly concerned about Egypt's relations with Britain.

5. Relations with Britain, not with Israel, are the main issue in Cairo today. Negotiations for a new treaty with Britain, together with Egypt's claims on the Sudan, provide a wide outlet for the sense of frustration engendered in Cairo by the Palestine defeats, and for the excessive nationalism which characterizes Egypt's foreign policies. They will probably occupy public attention to the exclusion of all other issues for some months.

**A** GAINST these factors, however, must be set others—psychological, political, and economic—which indicate clearly that, in the long run, Egypt will not easily be reconciled to the presence of Israel on its Eastern frontier. There is ample evidence in Cairo to show that, whatever immediate policy Egypt's rulers eventually may adopt, they view the establishment and growth of the new Jewish state as a direct threat to their social order, their economy, and their predominant role in the Middle East.

As a nation, the Egyptians are in the throes of an acute inferiority complex. A subject people for many centuries, they have at last thrown off the foreign yoke, and they are out to prove to the world—but most of all to themselves—that they can stand firmly on their own feet. Yet in their first major attempt at independent action, they were roundly defeated by a handful of people with no military tradition, who were poorly armed, and who, as Jews, would never have been permitted to serve in the Egyptian Army.

This was, more than anything else, a humiliating blow to Egyptian pride. Partial relief was provided by the rebuff which Egypt was able to administer to Britain in rejecting the latter's offer of assistance when the Israelis had turned the tables on the Egyptian Army and had invaded Sinai. After publicly snubbing Britain, the Egyptians found it easier to agree to an armistice with Israel. But the force of the blow is still felt.

By no one is it more keenly felt than by King Farouk who, it should be stressed, is no mere figurehead of a monarch but the most

important and the most self-willed political personage in Egypt. War on Israel provided a long-sought outlet for his ambitions, which petty cabinet-making in Cairo no longer satisfied. He identified himself closely with the Egyptian Army's advance on Gaza. The Egyptian public was reminded that their King came of a long line of soldiers, one of whom, Ibrahim Pasha, took Palestine from the Turks and shook the Ottoman Empire to its foundations in the early 19th century. Shortly before the final Israeli assault on the Egyptians in December 1948, Farouk visited the front, dined with his generals, and presented each of his officers with an inscribed copy of the Koran. His prestige has not yet recovered from the defeat which followed.

Politically, Farouk had another bitter pill to swallow when King Abdullah of Jordan emerged as the victor on the Arab side. This not only exacerbated an old rivalry, in which Egypt is aligned with Saudi Arabia against the latter's traditional foes, the Hashemite rulers of Jordan and Iraq; it also upset the balance of power among the Arab states and threatened Egypt's position as the leading Arab nation.

**T**HUS, while nursing her wounded pride, Egypt now has a double objective in view: to block any further extension of Abdullah's realm, and to restore her own power and prestige among the Arab nations.

By intrigues in Damascus and support for the anti-Abdullah factions there, Egyptian diplomacy has contrived so far to thwart Abdullah's plans for annexing Syria. It has not yet achieved its second objective. Both, however, could be attained by a successful war on Israel.

Egypt is encouraged to think of this "solution" by: (a) Israel's economic plight, which is growing steadily worse and which Egypt believes must be reflected in the state of the Israeli armed forces; (b) her own ample resources and wealth of manpower, which are such that the Palestine campaigns of 1948 were hardly felt by the public at large (the Arab refugees were simply kept out); (c) by her growing armed strength and the acquisi-



tion of new weapons such as submarines, with which she believes it will be easy to blockade Haifa and Tel Aviv; and (d) by what Egypt believes to be a growing lack of interest and concern in Middle Eastern affairs on the part of the American public.

Economically, Egypt views Israel as a potential menace to the major role which Egyptian business and finance would like to play in the Middle East. It is true that, given normal conditions, Israel would probably become a valuable customer for Egypt's surplus foodstuffs and raw materials. But Israel would want to pay for these with the products of her new light industries—and Egypt is currently engaged in expanding her own industrial production of consumer's goods. Her natural wealth and resources far exceed those of Israel, but the Egyptians are acutely aware that Israel already has more skilled labor and craftsmen than any Arab country; and that, given time, Israel will outstrip them all, as a Westernized, purposeful, energetic nation must surely outstrip a people most of whom live encrusted in medieval sloth, squalor, and corruption.

Here we reach the fundamental reason for the mistrust and enmity felt for Israel by the rulers of Egypt and the rest of the Arab countries, with the possible exception of Lebanon. It has little to do with religious animosity, the Arab refugees from Palestine, the possession of Holy Places or oilfields, or the policies of the Great Powers. It is simply a deep-rooted fear of the impact which a highly progressive state, organized on Western lines, must have on neighboring countries whose way of life has not changed, basically, for two thousand years or more.

**I**NDEED, so far as eighty per cent of Egypt's inhabitants are concerned, this way of life has not changed for four thousand years in this most modern and advanced of the Arab states. The Egyptian peasant, or *fellah*, continues to draw his water and till his land with the same instruments depicted in the rock drawings that embellish the tombs of the Pharaohs. He may ride to market in a bus or a train instead of on an ass—but he is still

disease-ridden; he still shares a mud hut with his cow and his poultry; he still lives off a handful of beans and rice; he is still illiterate; and he is still virtually the slave of a pasha who lives in a remote city and for whom he must toil from sunrise to sunset.

If he is a factory worker he dwells in a slum which, for depravity, has few parallels elsewhere. No trade union protects him. He earns a pittance, and until recently was glad to get it, for he knew no better. The occasional strikes are quelled with firearms.

The pasha has no wish to change all this, nor is he eager to welcome as his next door neighbor the modern factory workers and farmers of Israel, with their trade unions, social insurance, minimum wage scales, regular hours of work and days of rest, decent housing and clothing—and their politically conscious organizations.

This last, the political consciousness manifest in Israel, is what the rulers of Egypt fear most. It is still at a low ebb in Egypt itself, and what there is of it is carefully channeled into extreme nationalism. If the Egyptians do not have a better standard of living, they are told—when such matters are discussed in public (which is rare)—that it is entirely the fault of the foreign oppressor, who must at all costs be driven from Egyptian soil. Thus for the past thirty years Egypt's political parties have directed their main efforts to getting rid of the British and, progressively, to whittling down the influence of the prosperous non-Egyptian trading communities which grew up in the lee of British-imposed law and order. Scant attention has been paid to social problems. The main thing was, and is, to get the foreigners out.

**I**N ACTING thus, educated Egyptians were impelled by the current of ideas which spread with the end of World War I and found concrete expression in Wilson's Fourteen Points. Their political leaders became—and have remained—not royalists or republicans, conservatives, liberals, or socialists, but simply nationalists. The danger inherent in the political life of backward countries flowing into such a mold is that



little thought and no preparation are given to what is to happen after the occupying power has gone. In the Middle East, it is best exemplified in Syria, whose leaders, when the French were forced out five years ago, naturally became the men who had agitated most against French rule. Since then, they have revealed themselves to be morally incapable of government, with thought only for their personal gain, prestige, and power. Three coups d'état in a row by rival Syrian Army cliques are the result.

Egypt has not yet reached that stage, though the nationalist game is wearing perilously thin. The British abandoned Cairo and Alexandria three years ago and withdrew to the Suez Canal Zone, most of which is desert. The Egyptians thereupon turned on the foreign and non-Moslem communities in their midst, Greek, Italian, Jewish, and Armenian. Many of these people emigrated elsewhere, others merged their interests with Egyptian Moslems or became Egyptian nationals themselves. As these problems were solved, however, the nationalist leaders found fresh cud to chew. Currently it is the Sudan, which the Egyptians would like to take away from the British.

That Egypt has some legal rights to at least a share in the administration of this vast African territory cannot be denied. But that there are far more pressing problems to be dealt with fifteen miles south of Cairo instead of fifteen hundred miles away in Khartoum is equally true. One is forced to the conclusion that Egypt's present-day rulers would still rather devote their energies and talents to vain, profitless argumentation over such questions of national prestige than to tackling the really urgent business of raising the standard of living of the fellah and of the constantly growing number of industrial workers in the Nile Delta cities.

Already the latter form a fertile breeding ground for Communism, which is outlawed in Egypt. There is a very real danger of its spreading, however rigorous the police measures taken to suppress it, as the fellah becomes more aware of his suffering and the

possibilities of radical improvement. Yet no responsible Egyptian will publicly face the issue. The fellah has no means of improving his lot by pressure through normal constitutional channels. His government has all the trappings of parliamentary democracy—a model constitution, a senate and a house of representatives (called Chamber of Deputies), a supreme court and codes of law drawn from French legislation—but it lacks the mainspring. The power to activate these organs of government seldom comes from the people, though there is universal suffrage for all males over twenty-one years of age. Seventy-five out of every hundred Egyptian voters can neither read nor write and, if they vote at all, are as often as not coerced into doing so. For the remainder, personalities alone count, since there are no basic differences in the policies of the parties contesting an election.

THERE is one major exception to the above in the shape of the Wafd, which bore the brunt of the struggle against Britain in the early days of Egyptian nationalism. It has grown roots in the country as no other party has done. These sprang originally from the personality of Saad Zaghloul Pasha, its first leader and a great orator whom the British rated dangerous enough to deport from Egypt. Zaghloul died in 1926 and his mantle fell on men of lesser stature. But unlike other Egyptian parties, which die when their leaders pass away, the Wafd has survived. Zaghloul's memory still lives, and the party is popular with a large mass of the electorate. It does not have to carry its supporters to the polls in police trucks after beating them up, nor need it resort to publishing fake results, as is commonly done by its rival parties. It draws its strength from land-owning families and their villages which have voted Wafdist ever since they first had a vote, and also from a section of the new professional class—lawyers, doctors, engineers, and so forth—for whom its independent attitude towards the Palace has a strong appeal.

The Wafd's only serious rival to power is the King. Farouk, now thirty years of age,



inherited a strong prejudice against the leading party of his country from his father Fouad, who regarded the popular support it enjoyed in his day as a threat to his own position. In addition, a deep personal feud divides Farouk and Moustapha el Nahas Pasha, the present Wafdist leader, whom the king was compelled by the British, under threat of forced abdication, to accept as Prime Minister when the Axis forces menaced Egypt in 1941.

Under the constitution, Farouk is entitled to dissolve parliament when he sees fit and to appoint a government of his own choosing pending the outcome of new elections. Since coming to the throne twelve years ago, Farouk has twice availed himself of this privilege to dismiss the Wafd, replacing it each time by politicians who, to borrow a phrase current on such occasions in the government-controlled Egyptian newspaper, "enjoy the confidence of the king." A docile majority in parliament was obtained by combined palace and government pressure on the electorate or, where that failed, by faking the election returns. Egypt could thus appear in the eyes of the world as a parliamentary democracy, while in fact the country was ruled by a dictatorship of the palace, backed by royal patronage for its supporters, censorship of the press, a strong police force, and political exile for its opponents.

**E**GYPT emerged from just such a period of government in January of this year when the Wafd—which had been kept out of power for five years—won the election by a very large majority. The king's advisers were prompted to surrender the reins of power by Farouk's growing unpopularity with the small but increasingly influential middle class and with the army, which on its return from Palestine expressed avowedly Wafdist sympathies. (The Sudanese officer who commanded the Egyptians at Falujja and who was feted on his return to Cairo as the hero of the war was suspected of plotting to overthrow Farouk, and was removed summarily from Cairo to an obscure post in a remote province.)

At the same time, when revision of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty was substituted for a war on Israel as a nationalist issue, the British made it clear that they would not negotiate with a government that had no public support. This latter factor moved Farouk to give way to the Wafd, though the Wafd believes—and most political observers in Cairo agree with it—that once the treaty issue is settled, the king will dismiss the party from office with little loss of time.

If the Wafd is the party of the common man in Egypt, it cannot be said that it makes use of this prerogative beyond claiming his support at the polls. Once in power, the Wafdist leaders display in the main the same corruption, nepotism, vanity, and personal greed that characterizes most Egyptian politicians. This is almost axiomatic in a country where public spirit, as it is known in the United States or Britain, is virtually divorced from public life except on the strictly limited level of nationalism. Power is an opportunity to enrich oneself, one's family, and one's friends, to acquire more land, more wealth, and a new house at the expense of the public purse—and to drive out the foreigner. The public welfare, unless it offers particularly lucrative possibilities, is left to the permanent civil service which, because it is underpaid, is as corrupt as the men at the top.

There are exceptions to the rule, needless to say. Mahmoud Fahmy el Nokrashy Pasha, who was murdered when Prime Minister two years ago, was an honest administrator and died a poor man. Dr. Taha Hussein, the present Wafdist Minister of Education, is a poet, writer, and scholar of repute, one of the leading literary figures of contemporary Egypt. But such men are rarely found in Egyptian political life.

**W**HATEVER the failings of the Wafd, it is nevertheless a step nearer democracy than Farouk's conceptions of rule. The king is surrounded at court by flatterers, intent on pandering to the monarch's likes and dislikes. His minor whims become affairs of state and must be satisfied regardless of consequences. In the early days of his reign he had hopes



of reviving the Caliphate (which died out when the last Sultan of Turkey was deposed in 1923) and his supporters were ordered to acclaim him in public as "leader of the faithful." The plan, inspired solely by the king's ambitions and illusions of grandeur, met with no response in the Arab countries and was dropped just as suddenly as it had been contrived, though Farouk still is photographed every Friday attending midday prayers in one of the many mosques of Cairo or Alexandria. The public at large knows little or nothing of his private life, which is not exactly exemplary. A slavish press depicts him as a model king, a father of his people, the protector of the fellah and the workman, the patron of art and learning—yet he never stirs from his palace without a bodyguard.

In politics, Farouk's chief concern is with personalities rather than issues. His quarrel with Lord Killearn, Britain's wartime ambassador in Cairo, embittered Anglo-Egyptian relations for years. When the Arab League was formed, Farouk chose personally to align himself with King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia against the Hashemite princes who rule Iraq and Jordan, though there was nothing at the time to prevent Egypt from making common cause with all three countries, with which she then had only formal relations and no blood ties. This would have served the Arab cause better than Farouk's ambition to make Egypt the dominating power in the League, a fact which the other rulers resented, and which crippled the League almost before it was weaned.

In home affairs, Farouk fares little better. His quarrel with Nahas Pasha has vitiated normal political life for ten years. To keep the Wafdist leader out of office the King has had recourse to a series of "yes men" as prime ministers, only one of whom rose above the level of a puppet. This was Nokrashy Pasha, who led a splinter group of the Wafd, and who accepted power from the king while determined to steer a middle course. He was more concerned with home affairs than with the Arab League and, although not opposed in principle to a war on Israel, was against an early invasion of Palestine on the grounds

that Egypt was ill-prepared. He was overruled by Farouk, who had no wish to see his rivals in Jordan and Iraq enlarge (as he thought) their territories while Egypt remained idle. Since Nokrashy Pasha derived his power entirely from the king, and had no genuine party following, he gave way and carried out the king's wishes.

NOKRASHY PASHA was responsible for the repressive acts taken against Egyptian Jews at the time of the Palestine invasion. They constitute a large community, composed mainly of Sephardic Jews, whose emancipation and prosperity date back about a hundred years, when the influence of European liberalism first began to make itself felt in Cairo and French missionaries established schools there. The Mosseri and Cattawi families, who still bulk large in the Egyptian business world, were bankers to Farouk's father and grandfather. With the investment of British, French, and Belgian capital at the turn of the century, and the subsequent development of Egypt's cotton plantations, Cairo and Alexandria grew into modern cities. The greater part of Egyptian Jewry was concentrated there, and its members rapidly came to the fore as merchants and traders, fulfilling the role of middlemen between the foreign investors and the moneyed Egyptian Moslems, who were landowners with no knowledge of modern commerce. They adopted European dress and a Westernized mode of living. When the European powers compelled Egypt to establish special courts, composed of European judges, to ensure fair treatment for their investors and traders, many of the Jews acquired a foreign nationality in order to benefit from the protection of the new laws.

The Egyptian Jews, then, have lived in the main as a foreign community for many years, much as the Greeks and Italians, who crossed the Mediterranean in thousands to share in the new prosperity of the lower Nile valley. Their language and culture are French, not Arabic. They read French newspapers published in Cairo and Alexandria by Jews, their children attend French schools



and are sent to universities in France. They do not wear the scarlet fez or tarboush, which is the headgear of the urban Egyptian. They take no part in the political life of the country. Only a very small number of them are in government service, and none in high posts. They have always been allowed to worship freely and, since so many of them are engaged in commerce, Jewish religious holidays are observed by the banks and stock exchanges on a par with Christian and Moslem holidays.

Under the watchful eye of the British occupation forces, which up to 1947 had garrisoned Cairo and Alexandria for close on fifty years, the Egyptians maintained an unblemished record of tolerance for the foreigners in their midst. Then their own middle class began to grow. The British yielded gradually to the pressure of nationalism. Extra-territorial rights for foreigners were abolished in 1936. Egyptian Moslems began to demand a greater share in the finance and commerce of their country, which hitherto had been concentrated almost exclusively in foreign hands. The Jews naturally were among the first to feel the effect of this trend, which since the end of World War II and the British evacuation of the Nile Delta has become a definite, purposeful policy on the part of the Egyptian government. As a result, some Jews have reverted to Egyptian nationality (though not without difficulty), others have taken Moslem partners into their businesses and, at the government's request, Moslem employees. The reverse however is seldom the case. Moslem firms will not hire Jews or any foreigners, even in a technical capacity, unless they have no alternative. They are reluctant even to employ Copts (Egyptian Christians, of whom there are about a million) although the Copt is generally rated as a more industrious and skilled workman or clerk than the Moslem.

**T**HUS, even before the Arab invasion of Palestine, the Jews of Egypt, who have lived there for over two thousand years (Alexandria had a flourishing Jewish community in 300 BCE), found their future en-

dangered by nationalism. Zionism itself was not a serious source of trouble, since it was not popular among Egypt's Jews. When, on invading Palestine, the Egyptians took action against those they suspected of Zionist sympathies, fewer than two thousand Jews were interned, out of a community numbering some eighty thousand souls.

There were, besides, several days of mob rule in the streets of Cairo which the police did little to put down and during which no Westerner, Jew or Gentile, was safe. A number of Jewish business houses and shops whose owners were suspected of connections with Israel were placed under government control, in the same way as Axis property was taken over in the United States during the war. This undoubtedly led to abuses on the part of individual Egyptian officials, but the greater part of the property has now been restored.

All in all, it must be said, repressions during the period were less severe than those suffered in some other Arab countries. At this writing, some twenty thousand Jews have quit Egypt since 1948. A few have found their way to Israel, most have emigrated to France, Italy, South America, or elsewhere. In the main, they are young people who have little future in Egypt while the current phase of nationalism lasts—as it seems bound to do for many years to come. Those who remain have their roots in the country, and would be reluctant to leave unless faced with dire circumstances. They still play an important role in business and finance, and in the rapidly expanding field of Egyptian industry. Many of them are more prosperous than ever.

Egypt professes to distinguish between Jew and Zionist, Jew and Israeli. Nevertheless, in the event of further hostilities in Palestine involving Egypt—which, in the opinion of this writer, are bound to occur sooner or later—the situation of Egypt's Jewish community would certainly be in jeopardy. The extent of this danger depends entirely on the phenomenon which colors all events in modern Egypt—the extremity of nationalism prevailing at that time.